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Subaltern Subjectivation of Dalit Women in Bangladeshi Fiction: A Study of Harishankar Jaladas's *Sons of the Sea*

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Abstract

In recent years, subaltern discussion in mainstream literature, humanities, and social sciences has extended the subaltern question into Dalit existence and literature. While Dalit subalternity is a pressing issue in scholarly discussions, there is a substantial inadequacy of critical attention given to Dalit women, especially in Bangladeshi fiction. However, Harishankar Jaladas's rootedness in the Dalit community and a firm belief in the deconstruction and reconstruction of the asymmetric caste stratifications led the author to propagate an artistic gesture for the sublimation of the suppressed. Being a Dalit himself, Jaladas engages in various subaltern subjectivation, including the intersectional position of Dalit women. As Spivak says, this subjectivization is in opposition to the 'objectivisation' of the subaltern by non-subaltern writers. Therefore, this paper presents an investigation into the unexplored plight of Dalit women and their subsequent descent into subalternity using Jaladas' novel Sons of the Sea as the primary source of analysis. Keeping Spivak's arguments on female subalternity and its association with casteism at heart, it contextualizes Jaladas' Dalit Jaladasis (a term Jaladas has employed as the feminine form of Jaladas/Jele/Fisherman) into the subaltern question. Moreover, it offers an unerring illustration of how their perpetual suffering breeds resistance and counter contexts transcending patriarchal and casteist frameworks. For an objective and extensive analysis, theoretical concepts from diverse yet relevant sources and fields of Dalit subalternity and feminism have been investigated and brought to bear in this paper.

1. INTRODUCTION

Subaltern denotes a wide range of nuances in the Indian subcontinent, including the targets of the deepest form of oppression in society in terms of class, caste, religion, gender, etc. Indian subalterns are not constituted by any single community alone but by a multitude of varying groups with varying positions and socioeconomic fibers in the social hierarchy (Firoz, 2006, p. 44). Subaltern is a relational term categorized in relation to positional inferiority. In India, the concept of subaltern initially designated tribals and Dalits and was expanded in later decades to encompass women and other weaker sections of society (p. 33). The proponents of subaltern enterprise in this subcontinent presuppose caste segregation and hierarchies in every aspect of life. Anindita Pan says, "Caste has historically shaped the very basis of Indian economy and

Indian society and continues to have crucial economic implications today" (2021, p. 121). Although caste-based social stratification is pivoted on Hinduism and its culture, in Bangladesh, the notion of casteist hierarchy is espoused and internalized by Muslims both as a means of political oppression and political identity. Studies show that three broad categories of Dalits inhabit Bangladesh: "Bengali Dalits who live in villages all over Bangladesh; Dalits who migrated (or were forced to move) from India to what was previously East Bengal; and Muslim Dalits*"* (Islam & Parvez, 2013, p.13). Though as a religion, Islam does not recognize casteist hierarchy and division, "the socio-economic and cultural context of South Asia determines some Muslim communities as inferiors to others based on their occupations" (p.13). Their Dalit hood is determined more by the occupation they inherit and carry than the age-old scriptural untouchability that characterizes Dalit identity.

From an extensive categorization of Dalit occupation, fishermen (Jaladas, Jele, Naiya) constitute a major part of the Dalit community in Bangladesh. According to FAO, Bangladesh is one of the world's most important inland fishing nations (Rahman et al., 2017). Total employment in the fisheries sector is for 17.80 million people (11% of the total population), and the woman employment in the fisheries sector is 1.40 million (8.49% of fisheries sector employment) (Rahman et al., 2017). But still, fishermen are one of the most vulnerable communities in Bangladesh. The livelihood statuses of these fishermen are not satisfactory; the availability of fishes in the river is also declining day by day (Mahmud et al., 2015). Traditionally, it was the low-caste Hindus who engaged in the fishing profession: the Jaladas, the Malos, and the Malla Burmans, all popularly known as the Jeles, the Naiyas, or the Neyes (Alam, 1996). The last few decades have increasingly seen the entry of Muslims into the sector. On the one hand, these are members of poor Muslim communities in search of new income opportunities; on the other hand, wealthy individuals have invested in the marine fisheries sector once it has become a profitable business (Kleih et al., 2003). The materialization of Dalit subalternity is ensured by the discursive notion of 'purity' and 'pollution' and the wide reception and unquestioned acceptance of it. Society's consciousness is so saturated with casteist biases that they are often exploited as a crucial medium of hegemony. Through the exercise of such hegemonic beliefs and practices, traces of Dalit resistance are immediately mitigated, cementing the untouchables into perpetual subalternity. As Sunaina Arya puts it, "Violence against Dalits results from a caste-conscious psyche" (2020, p. 13) that transcends religious or national boundaries.

As caste politics and Dalit subalternity in literature and scholarly discussions are gaining prominence increasingly, narratives of Dalit women have started to make contributions in response to analogous forms of oppression exerted by both patriarchal and casteist discourse over those they consider subordinate. While vigorous debates have been held on whether casteist or gendered oppression is the more determining political factor in women's lives, women are subjected to myriad forms of oppression resulting from their positional inferiority. Dalit women are cut off from the mainstream culture, power structures, and privileges, being relegated to the position of subalterns. At the intersection of caste, class, and gender-based discrimination, Dalit women are particularly vulnerable to the practices of untouchability and violence, both in public life and within their community. Their 'woman-hood' and 'Dalit-hood' drive them into violence and discrimination outside their community including physical and

sexual assault, in worst cases, rape and murder. Often, they face gender disparities within their communities and houses dominated by the pervasive patriarchal values that infect and persist in Dalit communities as well. Biases prevail in property ownership, physical and psychological nourishment, access to education, workplaces, responsibilities within the household, and access to other facilities. Violence against Dalit women is even more atrocious outside their community, as they suffer from indescribable humiliation, inequalities, physical and sexual harassment, and continuous threats from some non-Dalits.

Against the background mentioned above, the question of subjugation and servitude multiplies while applying to the Jele women, the Jaladasis, the "marginalized among marginalized." Physical violence, verbal abuse, and other forms of oppression have always been incorporated as instruments to control and sideline women from the patriarchal regime, and without any doubt, these aggressions get thicker when added with other forms of injustice in the name of their caste or class. Women belonging to a lower caste Dalit community are made to shed bloody tears, but "in the half-darkness" of patriarchal subalternity, "one could not make them out clearly" (Jaladas, 2008/2017, p. 20). Whether the struggle is for power or more immediate issues like access to land, minimum earnings, equal shares of food, access to education, public places, or for mere survival, women of an excluded community are tortured, demeaned, and brutalized in every possible way. These disparities are constructed, promoted, and transported from the house, the community, and to the public in general. Underscoring the predicament of third-world women, Spivak (1988) writes, "[…] between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-construction and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shutting which is the displaced figuration of the 'third world woman' […]" (p. 306).

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Although discussions on Dalit movements and subalternity have proliferated extensively in India, Dalit feminism has not received adequate attention in theoretical and scholarly areas. Mainstream feminists are often accused of "separating the caste question from gender discourse," neglecting the brutal crimes against Dalit women (Arya, 2020. P. 14). What remains absent in mainstream feminist narratives is how "caste determines the division of labor sexual division of labor and division of sexual labor" (Rege, 1998, p. 44). Instead of recognizing the theoretical, academic, or intellectual contributions offered by Dalit women writers, Dalit feminist writings are often reduced to being only 'informants' of their stories (Chakravarti, 2012-13, p. 157) and often othered thorough 'us-them' narrative (Arya, 2020, p. 17). However, in recent years, scholars like Wandana Sonalkar, Sharmila Rege, Padmini Swaminathan, Samita Sen, and others have elaborated on the Dalit feminist question with the awareness of their struggles for survival and contribution to feminist discussions. In opposition to the exclusionary concept of 'Dalit patriarchy' proposed by mainstream feminists, they "offer an exploration of the interface of caste and gender" (Ray, 2018, p. 377).

In her article *Dalit Women in Modern India: Beyond the Standpoint Theory and Above the Women's Study Narratives*, Preeti Oza refers to the dichotomy of 'man' and 'woman' while contextualizing caste in the contemporary politico-economic scenario (2020, p. 1). The stigma

against the untouchables found sustenance in Indian society as a "religious duty" despite being outlawed in the Constitution of India. With the "triple burden of caste, class, and gender," Dalit women have been categorized by Dalit feminists as "Dalits of the Dalits" (p. 3). Atrocities against Dalit women are often legitimized and validated by using what Panchali Ray calls "a gendered language" (2018, p. 373). Similar scenarios can be seen across South Asia. In Pakistan, "Dalits are the worst victims of discrimination, rape, false blasphemy cases, and poverty" (as cited in Arya, 2020, p. 13). In Bangladesh, "Dalit girls and women are victims of prostitution and human trafficking for bonded labor, who lie at the bottom of the caste pyramid" (International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2016, p. 11). Unlike India or any other South Asian country, "Bangladesh has no official recognition of caste-based discrimination despite almost 5.5 million population of Dalits" (p. 11).

Institutions like Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDREM) and International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) have been working to address the plight of Dalit women, but their representations in literature and the theoretical arena have been significantly absent in Bangladesh. It has become an academic conundrum for researchers, given that there are few critical works and publications on subaltern Dalit women in Bangla literature. Owing to the insufficiency of fictional narratives and research works, an investigation of the subalternity of Dalit women in light of *Sons of the Sea* offers both difficulty and fresh insights into the subaltern questions in Bangladeshi literature. Considering the scenario, this article bears immense value by providing a critical endeavor in unveiling a new paradigm of subaltern discussion in Bangla literature.

Focusing on *Sons of the Sea*, Khandakar Ashraful Islam (2016), in his article "(Re)tracing Resistance from a Culture of Silence: An Alternate Reading of the 'Jele' (fishing) Community," traces the literary shift in portraying the fishermen community from Manik Bandopadhyay to Adwaita Mallabarman and Harishankar Jaladas, and examines the forces that entrap them into marginalisation, deprivation, exploitation, and subalternity. He probes into the hegemonic power structure and socio-economic apparatuses that keep their life unaltered and susceptible to oppression. Efforts are made to uncover their fatalistic consciousness and succumb to the imposed subalternity that they are powerless to resist. In true passion, their struggle for survival against the natural and systemic forces is scrutinised in light of the text *Sons of the Sea*. Moreover, relating to views from subaltern scholars, the economic stratification within their community is considered the social scheme that controls, dominates, and dehumanises them. What remains unexplored in that paper, however, is the presence, plight, and quintessential element of resistance found in the female characters, which this article sheds light on.

2.1. Research Objectives

The impression of the subaltern woman as "an (empty) space, an inaccessible blankness" (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p. 102) finds expression and exception in Jaladas' So*ns of the Sea*. It can be considered a multi-faceted representation of women, for firstly, it accounts for the tormented soul of women who have been detached from their essence of being, and secondly, it encompasses a strong resisting spirit that strives to retrieve what has been snatched

from them. In Jaladas' hero, Bhuvoneshwari, we see a desolate, forsaken subaltern woman who transforms to be a fearless fighter and breaks through the rubric of subalternity ahead of her male counterparts. Still, it is difficult to set aside how Jaladas, in the course of her transformation, builds up the systemic oppression they encounter at various levels, whether they are caste, class, or gender-based. *Sons of the Sea* echoes the aches and sufferings of women whose identity and existence are defined, constructed, and controlled by the ill standards of society. Therefore, this paper strives to contextualize subalternity within the casteist hierarchical lives of Dalit Jaladasis by undertaking an exploration into the diversified forms, nature, and magnitude of discrimination meted out to them. While doing so, it locates their spirit of resistance and responses in creating a counter-patriarchal and anti-casteist narrative.

3. STUDY METHODS

This study is a basic interpretative and qualitative inquiry into the horrendous condition in which subaltern Dalit women are entrapped and the process through which they enter the web of political suppression leading towards a vague human identity, through a textual analysis of *Jalaputra* (translated as *Sons of the Sea* by Quazi Mustain Billah). Concentrating on this novel as the primary source, this study is conducted by analyzing documents that include both online and printed articles, conference papers, and books written on subaltern theory. Previous research works, Ph.D. dissertations, and theses have been analyzed and used to identify the recurring patterns or common themes that overlap with the present study. The theoretical framework has been designed by contextualizing theories on female subalternity within Dalit discussion and literature.

3.1. Theoretical Assumptions

Postcolonial Indian society places women's lives at the intersection of race, caste, class, and gender, treating them as 'the other' and the subordinate. Through the hegemonic structure, it legitimizes the sufferings of women within the adjudicating discourse of Indian society and the Hindu Law, where gender is conceptualized as a legal weapon of domination. Although women have been considered inferior and only in terms of the opposite sex since time immemorial, the concept of 'gendered subalternity' came to be theorized very recently, which implies that women have been 'doubly subalternised'- based on race/nationality and gender.

> Spivak (2000) defines female subaltern in the South Asian context, saying,
> Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced… [T]he ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow. (p. 287)

Kaplan (2006) further explains Spivak's notion of female subalternity by stating, "This double effacement of the subaltern as female…is neither incidental nor epiphenomenal. Rather, it is the necessary precondition for the counterhegemonic production of the male subaltern as the nearly unimaginable subject of history" (p. 55). It explains women's subject position as subaltern and contemporary inequalities in patriarchal and postcolonial homogenization.

By systematic oppression of their gender, women in India are economically dispossessed and politically disempowered and "marginalized by the hegemonic hierarchy that constitutes the male gender as the elite gender and the female gender as the subaltern gender" (Young, 2012, p. 4). *Manusmriti,* one of the Hindu scriptures, advocates that a wife must pay the highest reverence to her husband because he is her God, and she must worship him even if he is bad or adulterous. Ambedkar, in his article "The Rise and Fall of Hindu Women" (2003), argues that the Hindu religion, through its religious texts, such as the *Manusmriti*, has always degraded women.

Subalternity is tripled for the lower-caste women, especially the Dalit women, owing to their untouchability and caste inferiority. When asked to distinguish between Dalit subaltern women and the mainstream gendered subaltern, Indian Tamil Dalit woman writer Bama (2007) tells *Littcrit* journal:

> All women in the world are second-class citizens, and Dalit women experience a total lack of social status; they are not even considered dignified human beings. Hard labor and agony are their lots in life. Other problems are the same for all women. (p. 111)

In her essay, "Dalit Women: Problems and Prospects," Bama writes, "Since our society is not only male-dominated society but upper-caste male-dominated society, a Dalit woman's problems are unique, she is a Dalit among Dalits" (2001, p. 329). Ruth Manorama, a Dalit Christian scholar, traces the roots of the degradation of Dalit women to the *Manusmriti*. The laws of Manu are still present in contemporary times. As Sonia Mahey (2011) observes:

> The horrendous laws in the *Manusmriti* were incorporated into Hinduism because they were favorable only to the upper castes, which form the majority of India. Even today, in modern times, we see the severe oppression and exploitation of Dalit women.

The dominant point of view in Indian society holds the male position as superior, and "women experience marginalization by virtue of patriarchal discourses of religion, family, and the state, which results in economic disadvantage and gender subordination" (Yvonne, 2015, p. 177). For Spivak, women's interception [in subalternity] can be staked out across strict lines of definition by virtue of their muting by heterogeneous circumstances (Morton, 2003), therefore leading us towards her stance on the ritual of *Sati* (widow burning) in Hindu society. In this age of ascending feminism and focus on equality and human rights, the practice of burning a widow to death on her husband's funeral pyre is unimaginable, and the practice is outlawed and declared illegal in today's world. Still, in a patriarchal society, the treatment meted out to a widow, especially a lower caste Dalit widow, is characterized by not only financial dispossession but with social insecurity, abhorrence of religion, and change in disposition. Dalit widowhood is marked with abstinence in food, restrictions in appearance, and debarring from ceremonial festivities.

4. DISCUSSION

The crowning significance of Jaladas' fiction lies in the fact that it "details the life of a woman who gets sucked into the battle with the sea unwillingly" (Billah, 2017, p. 7). He invests in Bhuvoneshwari to bring out how the nexus of poverty, repression, and injustice merge and haunt all the other female characters who are being trampled on by society. Married at an early

age, Bhuvon lost her husband to the violent waves of the sea and took the responsibility of raising her child on her shoulders. She "campaigns for the unacknowledged war for survival" (Billah, 2017, p. 8) when she takes up fish-selling, something "[n]o one ever dreamt that the daughter-in-law of such family would have to take up" (Jaladas, 2008/2017, p. 43). Bhuvon's commitment to her family is absolute, and it is unsupported or intervened by any masculine aid. Like Bhuvon, countless women lost their husbands to the sea and compromised with widowhood. Although women among the fishermen "are born to cook for the family and give birth to children every year" (p. 26), these widows "live by selling fish […] in the nearby neighborhood carrying the fish on their heads" (p. 31). Unlike the caste Hindus, widows of the fishing community are allowed to remarry. However, considering the future of their fatherless children, most of them choose the difficult path and stay widows.

In their journey to provide for their family, these women form what Uday Chandra (2015) termed "a negotiation rather than a negation of social power" (p. 563). Since their circumstances do not allow them to collect fish directly from the sea, they wait for the fishermen to reach the shore, buy fish from them at a low price, and sell them in the neighborhood, especially in the Hindu and Muslim colonies. The negotiation begins from the patriarchal hierarchy maintained on the seashore, where despite sharing the same profession, "[t]he female fish sellers would buy whatever was left behind after the male fish sellers had finished their purchase" (Jaladas, 2008/2017, p. 32). Their entrance into the same profession as their male counterparts does not erase the difficulty of transcending the restrictions imposed upon them; rather, they continue to "live as underlings in a strong patriarchal order" (Billah, 2017, p. 8). Starting from the patriarchal-hierarchical categorization within the community to the casteist-materialist customers, this negotiation proves to be a continuum in which the subjugated, subaltern women subsist with submission to the opposite or similar but powerful forces. Denying their labor and diligence in collecting fish, Jaladas shows how the customers from the Hindu and Muslim colonies try to rack their possessions. While buying fish from them, Jaladas writes, "[t]hey often take extra ones" (Jaladas, 2008/2017, p. 31), and when the fisherwomen refuse, they shout in revolt, saying, "You got them free from the sea. Why do you object if we take a few extra ones?" (p. 31). Without any utterance of protest, the fisherwomen brazenly negotiate their demands as a "fisherwoman can't have any sense of shame" (p. 44).

Even after being deprived of pride, possession, and primary needs, these women manage to "provide very little food for their children" with the "very little profit" they make by selling fish (Jaladas, 2008/2017, pp. 31-32). The hardship is much more intense for widows like Bhuvon, who are the sole earners of a family. Emphasizing her plight, Jaladas writes, "Sometimes skipping food altogether herself, or at times taking little, she served her father-in-law and Gangapado full meals…Eating less herself, she saved rice for her father-in-law's *panta*" (pp. 39-40). Their scream of hunger silences the whole community when the violent sea refuses to bestow them with fish. These extracts from *Sons of the Sea* are the quintessential illustration of their quandary:

> The male fish sellers scraping some income somehow run their families, but for the female fish sellers, things reach the last gasp. They have no earnings. Their little savings run out quickly. Indigence strangles them. In the beginning, they take half a meal of

> little rice with whatever little rice they can gather. But after that, they simply starve. (p. 53)

When their physical survival toughens in terms of starvation, deprivation, pain, torture, trauma, and hunger, all the high talks and morals about the impenetrable honor in female sexuality babbled by the fishermen in several instances crumble to the ground, and the negotiation with the social power stretches its limit by compromising the *Jaladasis*' dignity. In their conflict with poverty and patriarchy, their existence becomes the site for dominance and struggle, or what Nandini Bhattacharya (1996) termed in her article "Behind the Veil: The Many Masks of Subaltern Sexuality" as a "metonymic text of subaltern conspiracy and treachery" (p. 277). The story of Gopal and his wife Bakuli brings to the forefront how, in the fishing community, female sexuality is commoditized solely for monetary purposes. Women are sent to the *Bahaddars* [1] to negotiate the deal of buying fish as "the wife could pay less by importuning the *Bahaddar*" (Jaladas, 2008/2017, p. 34). These are the same fishermen whose verdict brought shameful punishment for Dinadayal and Mongli for the ignominious crime of adultery and whose hypocrisy turned their wives into sexual objects that are exchangeable with money. As Mary Capelli (2016) says, "Capitalist forces have penetrated female reproductive spaces, disposing them to sexualized and commodified sites of exploitative fluctuating ideological values" (p. 2). Thus, when Bakuli asks in gratitude how she can repay Bijon *Bahaddar*'s help, with brazen audacity, Bijon replies, "You don't need to return it, just give me a loving look" (Jaladas, 2008/2017, p. 34). Bakuli represents those women who "constitute a part of the property which men possess and which is a medium of exchange between them" (Beauvoir, 1956/1997, p. 96). In *Sons of the Sea,* we also find some sanctimonious Muslims who never miss a chance to abuse them for their untouchability but stand in line to strip off these *Dalit* women. Muslim intervention is evident in Ghurabi's plight, who took up fish-selling "to keep her husband and children alive" (Jaladas, 2008/2017, p. 37). To emphasize her impotence against poverty and the wealthy men of society, Jaladas writes:

> Abdul Majid of the Muslim locality often visited Ghurabi with or without any cause. Mostly, he could be seen at late night. The relationship between Ghurabi and Majid was for the sake of a handful of rice. (p. 37)

Trampled by all sorts of afflictions and injustices, these subaltern women indulge in self-denial and lose interest in themselves; as Adrienne Rich (1976) in her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* says, "Powerlessness can lead to lassitude, self-negation, guilt, and depression" (p. 57). Wearing "tattered clothes" (Jaladas, 2008/2017, p. 55) and carrying "a thick fishy stench" (p. 44) in their body, the fisherwomen live and "support others to live" (p. 45). While contemplating the sacrificial commitment of Bhuvon, Jaladas notes: "It's been a long time since she stopped taking care of her hair. Her appearance was getting paler. Her fair skin burnt by the sun was losing its luster" (p. 55). He further adds: "The skin of her hands and face had been scorched by the sun. Her two beautiful feet also bore obvious signs of neglect. The nails on her finger had also worn out" (p. 105). Losing her

[1] A solvent and powerful fisherman

husband at an early age, Bhuvon was exposed to the hideous truth and insufferable cruelties of the world, where she was repeatedly "bleeding inside, fighting with her own self" (p. 43).

The fiction is loaded with filthy characters like Jonaippa's *Baap,* who, with vulgar words and gestures, try to bulldoze, frighten, and torment women, foregrounding the threat that "this is what you are, this is what I can do to you" (Rich, 1976, p. 57). Realizing the fact that a substantial source of food might vanish after Bangshi's *Ma* refused to give fish to him, Jonaippa's *Baap* sought crooked ways to intimidate them. Shouting in anger, he threatens them, saying, "You son of a whore, I will see you both, son of bitches. I will see how that bitch gets to the sea to buy fish over my land" (Jaladas, 2008/2017, p. 91). He applies the same spiteful tone when Bangshi's *Ma,* along with the other fisherwomen, walks through the road which Jonaippa's *Baap* claims as his property and hits Bangshi's *Ma,* saying, "You *Doms* [2], you bastards…Didn't you remember that you would have to go over your fucker's land today?" (p. 103).

Following Rich's (1976) connotation that "the idea of power has, for most women, been inextricably linked with maleness, or the use of force; most often with both" (p. 64), Jaladas shows how the absence of masculine support exposes Bhuvon to the forceful exertion of patriarchal power. Although she managed to get a grip on herself after Chandrmoni's death, the death of her father-in-law made her susceptible to the treacherous traps of the vile fishermen. Therefore, finding her property unclaimed by any grown-up male, *Bahaddar* Golakbihari hatches a plot to take over her land and claims ownership based on some cooked-up relationship. But his deception didn't go unnoticed. The "arbitration" recognizes his fraudulence and trick of invading the property of a defenseless woman (for under patriarchy, women's strength depends on "whether she is attached to a man or not") and says, "[y]ou have grabbed the land of a helpless woman…Come, build a house on our land if you dare" (Jaladas, 2008/2017, p. 96).

Amid desperation, self-loathing, and concealed anger, the subaltern fisherwomen unleash their unconscious reservoir and refurbish themselves with a resisting spirit against the consistent victimization, brutalization, and dehumanization of their body and soul. Their powerlessness gives way to the courage to break the shackles of injustices because "resistances […] are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised" (Foucault, 1986, pp. 141-142). In opposition to the patriarchal forces imposed on them, the fisherwomen in *Sons of the Sea* rebel in a collective voice. Thus, Jaladas finds Bangshi's *Ma* refusing to give fish to Jonaippa's *Baap*; he finds Bhuvon seeking a solution to the "arbitration" rather than brooding over her fate, screaming in anguish, "down with your ancestors, how dare you hit a woman" (Jaladas, 2008/2017, p. 104) when Jonaippa's *Baap* hits Bangshi's *Ma*. Describing the incident, Jaladas writes:

[2] A term of abuse implying that one is low-born; the word is also used for helpers in crematoriums or people who are engaged in cleaning open latrines

> Pinching, scratching with nails, and slapping him, they knocked him on the ground. His vest was torn to rags. Clutching his *lungi* with his two hands, he somehow saved his honor and kept shouting, 'Save me. The Dom women are about to kill me. Is there anyone around? Save me from them.' (p. 104).

By disallowing to be tortured, beaten, and abused, the *jaladasis* refuse to reaffirm patriarchal control. The story of some fisherwomen beating up a man spreads quickly through the air. Bhuvon turns herself into Mahashweta Devi's "Dopdi"— the *Dalit* woman who dares to challenge patriarchy. Granting her a heroic stature, Jaladas writes:

> Four fisherwomen of the fishing community who had been oppressed all their lives avenged their long humiliation. Four destitute fisherwomen did what stout and wealthy fishermen had not been able to do. Bhuvoneshwari was cited over and over again. She led the assault. The woman who had been battered by fate all her life woke up today. (2008/2017, p. 104).

5. CONCLUSION

The women in Jaladas' fiction are poverty-stricken, uneducated, morally guided, and oblivious to the political hierarchy of caste that perpetuates their subalternity. This condition is further complicated and reinforced by the involvement of casteist Muslims who, despite having no affiliations with the Hindu caste order, hold these beliefs as weapons of categorization, control, and coercion. As such, the puppeteers in *Sons of the Sea*, who control the lives of these women, are Muslims. Caste is the capital ideology that cements Dalit women into perpetual subjugation.

However, the tremendous metamorphosis of Bhuvoneshwari from a timid, powerless Dalit woman to a loud, confident, and unwavering fighter is indicative of the Jaladasi's agency. Through the process of resistance, they have started to bring themselves into visibility. They have marched ahead from denial to assertion and from being victims to victors. But whether the tiny steps of resistance taken by a small group of fisherwomen can create the infrastructure that recognizes them or they get plunged into a darker corner of subalternity– is a concern that Jaladas keeps unanswered. Transgressing the manacles of subalternity, Jaladas' characters repudiate the hegemonic exploitation and fight for their rights, with a concurrent question as to what extent they can keep fighting. The final episode, portraying the death of Ganga, Bhuvon's son, is indicative of the oppressors' triumph over them. Their resistance, unaided by education, power, and inclusivity, does not guarantee their freedom. Instead, in all likelihood, it will push them towards the dark abyss of subalternity and fatalistic consequences.

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